DREISER AS A CRITIC OF AMERICAN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE

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PREFACE

Theodore Dreiser as an American novelist has had to brave the wrath of conservative critics and readers because of his resolute facing of actual life in his novels and because of his pessimistic attitude toward life. Forging steadily ahead, however, Dreiser has lived to see his standards prevail, and through his own efforts and through his influence on others has considerably enlarged the scope of American fiction. The primary object of the following study is to ascertain Dreiser's true worth and significance as a critic of American politico-economic life. To this end, the writer has attempted to analyze Dreiser's attitude toward American life in its relation to certain forces which influenced him as a man and writer.

The first chapter gives an interpretation of those forces in the life of Dreiser that helped materially to mold and shape his pessimistic attitude toward life and which, in consequence, influenced him as a writer.

The second chapter deals primarily with an analysis of Dreiser's novels for an evaluation of his portrayal of American politico-economic life. To the enormous panorama of life that the novelist has presented of the age in which he lived, historical facts have been supplemented either to support or refute his appraisal of American life.

The third chapter is designed to indicate in brief the principal values and limitations of Dreiser as a critic of the politico-economic life in America. The author hopes that readers will be stimulated to explore for themselves the novels of Dreiser, which contain many fascinating accounts of vital phases of modern American civilization.

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CHAPTER I

DREISER, THE MAN

As portrayer, critic and product of American economic and political civilization, Theodore Dreiser is important and intensely illuminating. The America which Dreiser portrays is one in which the industrial and scientific revolution was changing the whole spirit of American life. Dreiser was in the grasp of a new age; and everywhere was a revision of values. To understand Dreiser as a critic of American political and economic civilization, one needs as a background the knowledge of three forces that had direct influence upon him as a man and as a writer, namely: the conditions of his own personal life; the spirit of the times in which he lived; and the literature which he had read. These three forces serve well to emphasize the full import of Dreiser's criticism of existing conditions in America.

The man Dreiser represents a new element in the American literary scene, the infusion of new blood that came with the tide of European immigration following the fifties of the nineteenth century. His parents were immigrants of German descent from central Europe; and he was the twelfth of thirteen children in a family which was always near the edge of poverty, always moving from one town to another in the Middle West because of the rather strenuous demand for work. "Our family," writes Dreiser, "I was to learn by experience and reflection, had sometimes before my birth taken on the complexion of poverty and failure...."[1] His father, an orthodox

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, Dawn (New York, 1931), p. 12. Most critics in their accounts of vital phases of Dreiser's life draw heavily from either Dawn, or A Book About Myself, or from both for material. Likewise this study is greatly indebted to these autobiographies for the view taken in this chapter toward Dreiser the man.

Catholic, was religious and puritanical almost to the point of abnormality. "The devout father," says Van Doren, " - Dreiser called him bigoted - seemed a tyrant to his sons and daughters."[1] Concerning him, Dreiser comments:

> Indeed, he always seemed to me a man concerned more with the hereafter than with the now. Never have I known a man more obsessed by a religious belief. In short, the endless vagaries and complications of mood and conduct which followed upon this, succeeded in impressing me as mentally a little weak.[2]

Dreiser's mother, on the contrary, was a woman not at all affected by her husband's puritanical beliefs. She felt that human beings had trouble enough in maintaining themselves without being harried further by complicated social opinions or social notions. She knew much from direct experience of the driving passions and weaknesses of human nature and was far too generous and understanding to criticize much.[3] It is to be wondered how a man of Dreiser's father's iron conventionalism and moral intolerance should have fallen in love with and married a woman of so little moral and social sophistication as his mother. The father, however, could not restrain his flighty, impulsive children, who indulged at will in vagaries and sexual liberties.[4] The atmosphere was stern, but yet so lax.

Early in life Dreiser became antagonistic toward his father's preachments, toward organized religion, and all things connected with the Catholic Church. Lewisohn says, however, that Dreiser's strong mother fixation led to a hatred of his father, which disguised itself as a hatred of the father's

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[1] Carl Van Doren, The American Novel (New York, 1940), p. 245.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

[3] Ibid., p. 115.

[4] Fred Pattee, The New American Literature (New York,1930), p. 183. See also Theodore Dreiser, op. cit., p. 174.

faith and morals and a towering rage against Catholic christianity.[1] Being forced to attend Catholic schools instead of the free American public schools, Dreiser came to detest the rituals and the schools:

> My father, of course, imagined that I would be strengthened in Catholicism and that my soul would be saved, but you know how it is as to this last. I am in truth dogmatically speaking a total loss. In fact, it was the seeds here sown that definitely alienated me from the church....For my part I merely moaned and blundered among things which were said to be important and which meant little or nothing to me.[2]

What oppressed Dreiser most and delayed him in every phase of his development was the dogmatic and always threatening domination of the Catholic Church.[3]

Moreover, his family's and neighbor's total lack of moral restraints, early imbued in him a disgust of all moral conventions. The family always in dire circumstances, and always moving from one town to another, came into contact with those on the lower levels of American society, who sometimes were engaged in vice and physical pleasures as possible means of securing more money or of forgetting their lot. Of his sisters, Dreiser writes:

> Moral problems such as the lives of my several sisters presented to me no great weight....It is the way of life, however much socially it may be denied...and yet at times, and because of this, I had the notion that they were not doing right; that men (this must have been gathered from my father's preachments) were using them as mere playthings; but most of the time I had a feeling that they were their own masters. Also that perhaps they enjoyed being playthings. Why not?[4]

And Dreiser reiterates time after time:

> I know how futile are all earthly doctrines as to morals and virtues, and how incapable the most well meaning and

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[1] Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America (New York, 1932), p. 477.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, op. cit., p. 129.

[3] T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen (New York, 1928), p. 87.

[4] Theodore Dreiser, op. cit., p. 173.

> puritanic of virtue seekers of establishing the thing which they dream.[1]

Thus Dreiser, early in his life, was influenced negatively by his father's religious intolerance, and positively by his family's and neighbor's total lack of moral controls. However, Lewisohn states that the father's objection to the life and actions of the family is just, but Dreiser goes to irrational lengths in siding with mere looseness and dishonor. "This he must do; otherwise the father was right and the family was wrong, and this conclusion he cannot endure."[2]

From this atmosphere of poverty and loose morality, Dreiser, after spending one year at Indiana University because of the beneficence of a friend, in 1890 plunged as a reporter into the slums and police courts, and met with all sorts of misery, cruelty, filth, and graft. This was a period of excessive orgy and crime in the United States; and the nature of the world into which he was hurled had a depressing effect upon him. "The daily routine of my work seemed to provide ample proof of my suspicions that life is haphazard and casual and cruel; to some, lavish, to others, niggardly," he writes.[3] Witnessing the homes and working conditions of the down-trodden, seeing the wily, grafty politicians at work, in fact, being in contact with people in all seamy walks of life, he formed the opinion that all religionists were masqueraders looking to profit and preferment, that all politicians were tricksters, juggling with the moods and passions of the ignorant public, that all public officials were corrupt, and that the working man was

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[1] Ibid., p. 393.

[2] Ludwig Lewisohn, op. cit., p. 477.

[3] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself (New York, 1922), p. 140. Also see Robert Duffus, "Dreiser," Criticism in America, ed. W. A. Drake (New York, 1926), p. 52.

always treated unjustly.[1] Such experiences in Dreiser's life aided in the development of his pessimistic and cynical attitude toward religion, toward moral conventions and toward life in general. Pattee writes that "Dreiser's job as a reporter...as a recorder of the human garbage of a city's day, was a four years' course in disillusion."[2]

Therefore, as can be seen, the force of Dreiser's own personal life and environment had tremendous influence upon him as a man and writer. His poverty-stricken family drifted about the West; and in most of the communities, he moved in that stratum of society where puritanic restraints had no weight. His antagonism to his father's stern religious intolerance, his contact with the loose morality of his associates and neighbors, and later the revelation of the sordidness of life that he received as a newspaperman, aided in the development of a belief that all religions are absurdities, that all moral controls are futile, and that life is casual and cruel.

Still another force, the spirit of the times in which Dreiser lived, had a decided effect upon him as a man and writer. His naturalistic view of life could hardly fail to be reinforced by the spectacle of urban life in America during the latter years of the nineteenth century. In the declining years of this century, several forces were at work which were destined to bring the most far-reaching changes into the life of every American. Chief among these forces was industrialism. The use of inventions to apply mechanical power to industry, the expansion of production, the concentration of laboring classes into factory areas and slums, the heaping up of unemployment as men were replaced by machines, the consequent decline of wages to a consequent subsistence level--all aided in shaping a side of American life. A

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[1] Ibid., pp. 397-8.

[2] Fred L. Pattee, op. cit., p. 182.

passage from Taylor's History of American Letters gives us this measure of the times:

> Whereas American manufacturers in 1870 were valued at three billion dollars, in 1900 they were valued at nineteen billion. From expanded production came a ruthless competition, which led otherwise legitimate businesses into acts little better than piracy.[1]

Taylor further explains that oil companies sought to wreck each other by securing railroad rebates; two railways made open war on each other with gangs of hired thugs; and unscrupulous promoters made millions out of watered stock.[2] In the effort to relieve the stress of competition, businesses were consolidated with breath-taking rapidity.[3] Dreiser himself says of this period:

> I was tremendously interested by the various captains of industry then already bestriding America, their opportunities and pleasures, the ease and skill with which they organized trusts and combinations, their manipulations of great railroads, oil and coal fields...their sharp and watchful domination of American politics....My thoughts leaped to the artistic spectacle such material prosperity might present, not to the purely material phase of the prosperity itself.[4]

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[1] Walter F. Taylor, The History of American Letters (New York, 1936), p. 247. Also see Freemont P. Wirth, The Development of America (New York, 1937), p. 428.

[2] Walter F. Taylor, op. cit., p. 247. Also see Harry J. Carmen, Social and Economic History of the United States (New York, 1934), p. 651. To prevent Vanderbilt from securing a majority of Erie Stock and to cripple him financially, Gould issued ten million dollars of bonds convertible into stock which he dumped on the market when Vanderbilt, a heavy purchaser of Erie, had pushed the price to record levels. Ibid.

[3] Boas and Burton record that John D. Rockefeller established the first great combination aiming at monopoly. Step by step he brought the oil industry under his control. Year after year the Standard Oil Company got its hands on an increasing number of its competitors and controlled more than ninety per cent of the refining business in the country by 1880. Social Background of American Literature (Boston, 1939), p. 175.

[4] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 213.

The development of industry brought the United States to the front as a leading manufacturing nation. This process of development revolutionized manufacturing, agriculture, transportation, and mining as well as morals and philosophy.

During the Industrial Revolution both towns and cities were growing rapidly. Shops, factories and stores were multiplying, and people were crowding from the country and towns into the cities. Ruggs writes that the lowest paid laborers filled to overflowing the tenements of the cities. Into the larger cities hordes of immigrants were pouring. Steadily the proportion of Anglo-Saxon population decreased as tens of thousands of immigrants settled in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. Chicago was a thriving city and its industries were booming and attracting cheap labor.[1] Dreiser includes the following passage about the spirit of the times in his autobiography:

> Never in my life...was the vast gap which divides the rich from the poor in America so forcefully brought home to me....Never did the mere possession of wealth impress me as keenly....It seemed astonishing to me that some men could thus rise and soar about the heavens like eagles, while others, drab sparrows all, could only pick among the offal of the hot ways below. What were these things called democracy and equality about which men prated?[2]

Dreiser, impressionable and skeptical, was intensely disturbed at the flow of life about him. He comments that all American cities were busy with but one thing, trade or commerce. They ate, drank and slept trade.[3] In his wanderings, he found huge steel works with pathetic little hovels about them.

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[1] Harold Ruggs, A History of American Government and Culture (Boston, 1931), p. 506.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, pp. 392-3.

[3] Ibid., p. 376.

This evidence of the little brain toiling for the big brain struck him with great force and produced in him a great deal of concern and meditation.[1] Thus there was in America a facing of material facts of a new order, the growing domination of the machine, the concrete reality for the first time keenly felt of crowded urban areas. Meanwhile on all fronts, the industrialization of the country was going on apace.

Inevitably with the industrialization of the country, class consciousness among Americans became more acute. The leisure class of America was developing. In 1861, there were only three millionaires. By 1900 there were 3800.[2] At the top of the social ladder was a plutocracy of fabulous wealth that dominated the industrial order as completely as any hereditary autocracy. Next came the middle classes, composed of professional men, merchants, small tradesmen and farmers; and next came an increasingly class-conscious proletariat, ranging from skilled workmen, who maintained powerful trade unions on a national scale, down to wretched sweatshop toilers, who eked out miserable existences in miserable slums.[3]

It was generally agreed that one-tenth of the people owned nine-tenths of the wealth. By 1900, this tenth of the people set the standards of the new society which was evolving in the United States.

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[1] Ibid., p. 376.

[2] Harold Ruggs, op. cit., p. 511.

[3] Walter Fuller Taylor, op. cit., p. 248. Also see Carl R. Fish, The History of America (New York, 1925), p. 456. In 1884, the Bureau of Labor had been created to study labor conditions. Later the American Federation of Labor in 1886 sponsored the eight hour a day campaign. Trade unions' main purpose was to make collective bargaining with the employers, for they felt that the individual laborer was at a disadvantage in dealing with men who had so much greater resources at command. Ibid.

In this growing class of newly rich, there were some who had worked hard, honestly and intelligently for their money; yet, as Ruggs confirms, others had gambled and profiteered to get it.[1] In contrast to the aristocratic, intellectual person's lack of display, these newly rich plunged into a display of luxury and lavishness. Note Dreiser's comments:

> Mere money, often unworthily inherited or made by shabby methods, seemed to throw commonplace and even wretched souls into such glittering and condescending prominence, in this world at least. Many of the business men with whom I came in contact were vulgarians, their wives and daughters vain and coarse and inconsiderate. I was constantly impressed by their airs...their craving for show and pleasure...their hearty indifference to anything except money, plus a keen wish to seem to despise it.[2]

Under the impact of industrialism the cultural life of America seemed at first to decline. However, by social contacts and by intermarriage the older aristocratic families gradually absorbed the newly rich. Before 1900, each city could boast of a well organized best society. This leads us to the goal of every American: larger wages or salaries, better houses and luxuries. Boas and Burton state that a new economic theory was preached that "a nation was happiest when it spent, not when it saved; and money was continuously sought after and spent."[3] An atmosphere of hurry and restlessness was spreading in America. Meanwhile, the four classes in American society lived entirely different lives; for the Industrial Revolution wrought profound

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[1] Harold Ruggs, op. cit., pp. 510-11. Many of them were people who had found their wealth in Pennsylvania; gold or silver in the rockies. Still others were people who had secured franchises for railroads and other transportation systems and had profiteered at the expense of the city, state or national government.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 141. See also James T. Adams, The March of Democracy (New York, 1933), II, 138.

[3] Ralph Boas and Katherine Burton, op. cit., p. 227. Everywhere men were dreaming of opportunity, past or still to come. "Getting somewhere" was the aim of the American public.

changes in American civilization, and social classes had been re-aligned in a manner roughly resembling feudal Europe.

With the amassing of wealth by the great captains of industry, Americans were attempting to carry on democratic government under difficult conditions. In the first place, the millions of immigrants, who were entering the country were bringing to America their customs, languages and traditions. To teach them American ways of thinking and living and to make them Americans was indeed a difficult process for any government. Moreover, many of the people of the United States were uninformed as to the problems of government. They were spending their time and energy in earning a living, and cared little what was happening in government. The larger factor, however, was that business was now beginning to interfere in the government; and after 1870 business leaders and professional politicians controlled the government. First, the politicians protected business by maintaining a high tariff.[1] In 1899, the Republicans, under Harrison, raised the duties on foreign goods higher than ever before and later, in 1896, McKinley passed the Dingley Tariff Bill, which provided for higher tariffs still.[2] In the meantime the masses complained that they did not need the tariff bill. It did not protect them, and it did raise the cost of living.

Political leaders protected the growth of the great corporations in many other ways. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, investigating committees disclosed the close relationship between certain politicians and corporations. In 1876, a "whiskey ring" was unearthed, composed of government

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[1] James Rhodes, History of the United States (New York, 1929), IX, 41. Also see Harry J. Carmen, op. cit., p. 651.

[2] Ibid.

revenue officers and leading distillers. The president's private secretary, Bacock, was guiltily involved. The affair was followed by the resignation of Secretary of War, Belknop, in order to escape impeachment proceedings on the charge of receiving annual bribes since 1870. It was also disclosed that James G. Blane, Speaker of the House, while holding office, had acted as bond salesman for a land-grant railroad; and he had later premitted the Union Pacific and certain other land-grant corporations to relieve him of a large block of the bonds at a sum far in excess of their market value.[1]

Many of the statesmen felt that the best interests of the nation could be served by permitting wealth to be concentrated in the hands of a few. This was the view held by William McKinley, whose campaign for election as president was directed by Marcus A. Hanna, himself a man of wealth and spokesman of big business in politics.[2] Wirth records that in this campaign the business interests of the country contributed more than four million dollars to the Republican campaign fund; the Standard Oil Company alone contributed two hundred-fifty thousand dollars.[3] During McKinley's administration big business considered that it was free from government interference. Such were the men who formed the American government in the latter part of the nineteenth century. They were political machinery and not great political statesmen. In the years of business expansion, it was inevitable that much of the invisible government should be unscrupulous, and much of it carried on in

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[1] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Political and Social History of the United States (New York, 1932), p. 297.

[2] James Rhodes, op. cit., p. 23.

[3] Fremont Wirth, op. cit., p. 437.

the interest of the few.

Dreiser's view of life could not fail to be reinforced by the spirit of the times in which he lived. He witnessed the factories and railways, the palaces and slums, and came to believe that men were divided into the strong and weak, either victors or vanquished. Not a day passed that he was not filled with observations of the lack of honesty, virtue, kindness, even human intelligence, not on the part of a few, but of nearly everybody. He had the same desire as all Americans to share in the splendors of wealth and high places generally; yet he felt he had little chance to realize this dream:

> One of the things that grieved me intensely was the sight of bitter poverty and failure, and the fact that I personally was not one of those solid commercial figures of which America was full at this time. Despite my literary and artistic ambitions, I still continued to think it essential to me, and to all men for that matter if they were to have any force and dignity in this world, that each and everyone should be in control of...something commercial and successful. And what was I....At times this state of mind tended to make me irritable and even savage instead of sad....Look at the strong men at the top, I was constantly saying to myself, so comfortable, so indifferent, so cruelly dull.[1]

Life with its contrasts and disappointments, with its lacks and enticements, was always prodding him; and more and more, Dreiser came to feel that life was a siren force--brutal, subtle, charming and selfish.

During this age of industrialism and the machine, the more fundamental forces of science and psychology began their conquest of national thought. A new curiosity about human nature in all of its phases arose. Literate Americans read the literature of English, Russian, and French naturalists and scientists like Balzac, Spencer, Huxley, Hardy, Mills, Tolstoi, de Maupassant, and Freud. To the naturalistic thinker, man is not a complex intelligence controlling his destiny by free will; he is a machine controlled by

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 370.

inner constraints of instinct, or by the outer forces of environment and circumstances.[1] Therefore, the consistent naturalist holds that "human life and man's every action are shaped by physical forces beyond his control."[2] To present life faithfully, the naturalist feels that he must delve into the study of man, even to the lowest levels of society. This new naturalistic philosophy created awakening interest in human nature.[3]

The interest in psychology and science spread with such amazing rapidity that their influence was soon noticeable in American literature and society. Boas and Burton are of the opinion that until the time of Sigmund Freud, psychology had been characterized by the abstract qualities of philosophy. But Freud, with his new doctrine of psycho-analysis, with his emphasis on the importance of sex, attracted popular attention. People began to wonder about their own peculiarities and of their own dreams.[4] No longer was it only in the use of his mechanical and electrical labor-saving devices that the layman found need of a rudimentary knowledge of scientific principles; psychology was regarded as no less practical.

It was through the medium of two schools of psychology, the behavioristic and Freudian, that scientific materialism impinged most upon literature.

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[1] Ralph Boas and Katherine Burton, op. cit., p. 240.

[2] Walter Fuller Taylor, op. cit., p. 310.

[3] Ralph Boas and Katherine Burton, op. cit., p. 240. Psychology was stimulating to society because it increased the importance of the individual. People began to look for abnormalities in the action of others, and points of view in regard to social problems changed because people "understood" why crimes were committed and why members of society suffered mental disorders. Also note Oscar Cargill, Ideas on the March (New York, 1941), p. 608.

[4] Ralph Boas and Katherine Burton, op. cit., p. 241.

Behaviorism sets forth these ideas:

> Man is in large measure an automaton; his reactions to certain stimuli are as mechanical and predictable as that of water to a current of electricity. And clearly (the behaviorist reasoned) if some human reactions were automatic, all the rest, including the most elusive workings of a poet's imagination might be.[1]

Freudian psychology, like the behavioristic, rests on the general assumption of scientific materialism:

> Man, it is premised, is controlled largely by impulses from the sex instinct. The impulse is conceived of as having a fixed amount of force, which may be either directly expressed or sublimated in some other activity, such as religious devotion; or if repressed it will cause "complexes" or pathological disturbances.[2]

One important effect of behavioristic and Freudian psychology on literature was that it enlarged the author's understanding of human nature, and gave a powerful impulse for the use of psychological interpretation in general.[3]

Together with the effect of the conditions of Dreiser's own personal life, and the effect of the spirit of the times upon him, is linked another force: the literature which he had read. It is only natural that Dreiser, being an avid reader, should have become stimulated by the new philosophy and psychology. And as a consequence of reading the new literature, he was influenced both as a man and writer. The year spent at Indiana University enabled him to develop an interest in books that stemmed from his boyhood, and acquainted him particularly with Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, and with other interpreters of science. A college classmate, whom he remembers as "the only true instructor I had, the one from whom I could and did gain most,"[4] was a

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[1] Walter Fuller Taylor, op. cit., p. 332.

[2] Ibid., p. 333. Cf. Oscar Cargill, op. cit., p. 612.

[3] Ibid., p. 614.

[4] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 396.

great mental fascination and a source of development for him. Dreiser writes this of him:

> He was tender and loving toward the errors and ills of life, and from the very beginning endeavored to turn my ability and taste into the line of altruistic inquiry.... We discussed all of Tolstoi's theories and questioned somewhat whether they were applicable or workable, human nature being what it was and Darwin's "Survival of the Fittest" having sunk deep.[1]

Weekly contacts and evening readings aroused and kindled Dreiser's interest in the natural sciences and philosophy.

Later, when Dreiser moved to Chicago and obtained his job as newspaperman, he lived in close intimacy with men whose conversation was of Balzac and Zola. Of his city editor, Dreiser writes:

> He had the strangest, bossiest love of great literature than anyone I had ever known....Zola at that time was properly his ideal of what a writer should be. He was always calling upon me to imitate Zola's vivid description of the drab and gross and horrible if I could, assuming that I had read him, which I had not, but did not say so, and Balzac's sure handling of the sensual and poignant[2]

As a consequence, Dreiser, in the public library, expanded his knowledge of Balzac and Zola, who were, up to then, mere names to him. He was fascinated by Balzac's The Great Man from the Province, Wild Asses Skin, and particularly by Comedie Humaine. Thereafter he began to envision himself as a realistic writer who portrays the true facts of life with all of the vividness, frankness, and color that Balzac does. For a period of more than four months, he ate, slept, dreamed, lived Balzac and his characters, his views, and his picturization of Paris. He enthusiastically remembers:

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[1] Ibid., p. 397. Also see Percy H. Boynton, Literature and American Life (New York, 1936), p. 791.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 207.

> It was for me a literary revolution. Not only for the brilliant and incisive manner with which Balzac grasped life and invented themes whereby to present it, but for the fact that the types that he handled with most enthusiasm and skill--the brooding, seeking, ambitious beginner in life's social, political, artistic and commercial affairs...were, I thought so much like myself....I was obtaining a new and more dramatic light on the world in which I found myself [1]

Through Balzac and Zola's direct presentation of the elemental facts of life, Dreiser saw a chance for the revelation of such facts about American life. These men, then, were a great inspiration to him.

About the time that Dreiser became acquainted with Balzac and Zola, he also became deeply interested in the scientists Huxley and Spencer. Although he had become acquainted with these Victorian popularizers of scientific thought at the University, he had not read them deeply nor seriously. Prior to this time, he had held the conviction that by hard work and a blazing and steady desire, he would eventually be able to reach the zenith of success. However, under the influence of these scientific thinkers, he adopted a mature skepticism. The following paragraph expresses the uncertainty and wonder that overwhelmed him:

> ...I had the fortune to discover Huxley and Tyndall and Spencer, whose introductory volume to his Synthetic Philosophy (First Principles) quite blew me to bits. Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociological deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading his "Science and Hebrew Tradition" and "Science and Christian Tradition" and finding both the Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth, but mere records of religious experiences and very erroneous ones at that, and then taking up First Principles and discovering that all I deemed substantial, man's very identity save as an infinitesimal speck of energy or a "suspended equation"...I was completely thrown down in my conceptions or non-conceptions of life.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 411.

[2] Ibid., pp. 457-8.

Dreiser, after viewing those regions of indescribable poverty and vast wealth previously mentioned, could only think that since nature would not do anything for man, he must, if he could, do something for himself. But, after reading Huxley and Spencer, he saw no prospect of man helping himself; for he was the product of accidental, indifferent, and bitterly cruel forces.

Thus began the determining influence on Dreiser's philosophy--a philosophy of naturalism. One's ideals, struggles, and joys he began to view as mere chemic compulsions. Man is a mechanism, and a badly driven mechanism at that. He expresses the effect of this realization upon him:

> I fear that I cannot make you feel how these things come upon me in the course of a few weeks reading and left me numb, my gravest fears as to the unsolvable disorder and brutality of life eternally verified....I was daily facing a round of duties which more than ever verified all that I had suspected and that these books proved.[1]

And so Dreiser went from day to day reading and thinking, always withdrawing more and more into himself, believing the world hopeless, and neither understanding the world nor believing that men understood each other very well. Dreiser's outlook on life became totally warped or one-sided. Such a limitation caused him to fail to see life whole. Whipple makes this diagnosis of Dreiser's reaction:

> He went through the experiences so common and so painful in the nineteenth century, of losing faith. Like his contemporaries, he experienced a reaction--much the same sort of reaction that everyone goes through on reaching adolescence and leaving the easy harmless world of childhood, but in Dreiser's case aggravated by many circumstances, among them his advanced age. His awakening came ten years too late, and was much more severe....The pained amazement with which he

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[1] Ibid., p. 458.

> views imperfection and inconsistency...the lack of scale in judging values...one is tempted to suggest that Dreiser's is a case of delayed or arrested development, that he is never quite grown up, developed, and matured.[1]

Another writer, Walter Fuller Taylor, has this passage on Dreiser's pessimistic view of life:

> He does not understand the large aggregate of people in whom disciplined self-control prevails over impulse; nor does he portray adequately those in whom altruism--or at least an enlightened or sublimated self interest prevails over selfishness. He is imperfectly conscious of beauty; grace and lightness of touch are usually beyond him. Deprived of the rich hues of beauty, joy, and humor, the light of life which filters through Dreiser is bleak indeed.[2]

Dreiser had lost faith entirely in mankind; and there was no hope nor glimmer of light in life for him. He saw only life's seamy side and that with the eye of a disillusioned and dejected man.

After Dreiser's reading in the natural sciences, he began to examine the current American magazines, fiction, and articles of such writers as William Dean Howells, Charles Warner, George Cable, Thomas Nelson Page, and many others who wrote of nobility of character, the greatness of ideals, and the joy of simple things.[3] Thus he became more confounded than ever between his own observation of the brutishness of life, and those displayed by these writers of hope, of faith, and of beauty. They seemed to deal with inactualities, with the good and the beautiful in life, which he rarely encountered. Thus he concludes:

> As I viewed the strenuous world about me, all that I read seemed not to have very much to do with it. Perhaps I thought,

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[1] T. K. Whipple, op. cit., p. 88.

[2] Walter Fuller Taylor, op. cit., p. 376.

[3] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 491.

> life as I saw it, was never to be written about....I read, but all I could gather was that I had no such tales to tell.... When I think of the literary and social snobbery and bosh of that day, its utter futility and profound faith in its own goodness, as opposed to facts of its own visible life, I have to smile.[1]

From this point of view came the basis for Dreiser's novels, which are pitiless in their picturization of the depravity of human life and human values, and are characterized by Dreiser's naturalistic philosophy. Calverton's comment supports Dreiser's own statement:

> While unquestionably Dreiser was influenced by the scientific spirit of his age, and was stirred by the deterministic doctrine which had gained a significant place in European thought, it is to America and not to Europe that we must look for the real basis of his philosophy of despair.[2]

Thus Dreiser, we find, derived the pessimistic philosophy that had such tremendous effect upon him as a man and writer from three general sources: from the conditions of his personal life, from his environment, the United States between 1870 and 1900, and especially from his reading in the natural sciences. The son of poor German immigrants, who were always moving from town to town in the Middle West in search of work, Dreiser moved constantly in a circle of people who cared little for social or moral restraints. His own sisters were flighty and impulsive; and these conditions tended to create within him an impression that all moral controls and conventions are futile. Moreover, his father's stern religious intolerance caused him to become antagonistic toward Catholicism and all religious beliefs. In addition, Dreiser himself has written that his experiences as a newspaperman and his recognition of the wide gap between the rich and the poor and the many vices of society

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[1] Ibid., p. 492.

[2] V. F. Calverton, The Liberation of American Literature (New York, 1932), p. 411.

aided in the development of his pessimistic view of life. Furthermore, Dreiser grew up in the ultra-practical society which he depicts in his novels. Whipple's statement as to the effect of his environment upon him is significant. Dreiser, he is of the opinion, has merely made explicit the view of life which he found implicit in American society, a society wholly given over to economic individualism, merely reduced American practice to a philosophical theory.[1] Later in life, the discovery of the Victorian popularizers of scientific thought--Spencer, Huxley and others; and the French naturalists, Balzac and Zola--convinced Dreiser that man is a mechanism, ruled by indifferent, haphazard, and bitterly cruel forces over which he has no control. Through and through, we can say, that Dreiser is a product of a thoroughly mundane society, a society largely given over to industrialism and science. And all three forces had their part in shaping Dreiser's attitude toward life and toward his ability as a writer. In short, they effectively helped in shaping Dreiser the man.

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[1] T. K. Whipple, op. cit., p. 87.

CHAPTER II

THEODORE DREISER'S CRITICISM OF AMERICAN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

Theodore Dreiser in portraying American economic and political civilization was influenced, as it has been shown, by life in the United States, chiefly from 1870 to 1900, an age of big business and industrialism. Michaud writes that Dreiser is the historian of an America which sits anxious among its heaps of riches. It is a country of ever-increasing material comforts and luxury, of quick gains and tremendous affairs, a land where the dollar is as rapidly spent as earned, in brief the most stupendous utilitarian civilization that the world has ever seen.[1] Such an influence aided Dreiser, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, in molding his philosophy of naturalism. Believing implicitly that life is composed of the strong and the weak, and that to the strong go the spoils of the earth, Dreiser in his criticism of American civilization attempts to reveal the method by which the strong and the forceful drive ahead, leaving the weaker man destitute, groping and poor in a society interested in industrialism.

As a critic of American economic and political civilization, Dreiser really speaks neither for nor against existing conditions and practices. His purpose, however, is merely to present the facts. Charles Walcutt attests to this:

> He does not suggest that modern society is perfect or that nothing can be done for it. Although he hopes for social improvement, Dreiser's purpose in his novels is to deal with life as it is lived under modern economic conditions. His art is

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[1] Regis Michaud, "Theodore Dreiser as a Bio-chemist," The American Novel Today (Boston, 1928), p. 71.

> devoted to a study of things as they are--which is to say that he is a successful novelist, rather than a pseudo-scientist or propagandist.[1]

Pattee is in accord with Walcutt in that he states that Dreiser's object primarily is not to preach or to condemn, but to hold the mirror up to the facts of the day.[2] Therein the novelist wishes to reveal the true existing conditions in American civilization during an age mainly interested in commercialism.

The six novels that Dreiser has written in the order of their publication, Sister Carrie, 1900, Jennie Gerhardt, 1911, The Financier, 1912, The Titan, 1914, The Genius, 1915, and An American Tragedy, 1925--all have as their basis the American absorption in business and the "dollar." The novels The Financier and The Titan, twin epics of America's industrial and commercial expansion, are particularly concerned both with big business--its mad competition which crushes the weak, the ignorant, and the untrained--and with politics. Thus, each of the books discloses the keen conflict between the economic environment and society.

First, Dreiser reveals through his novels the close relationship that exists between politics and "big business," with the strong control that financiers exerted over politicians. The politicians of the era, gullible and corrupt, were supported by financiers and secured legislation in their favor, and in turn were dictated to by the financiers. The Financier and The Titan form a single story of the adventures of an unscrupulous captain

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[1] Charles Walcutt, "Three Stages of Dreiser's Naturalism," PMLA, LV (March, 1940), p. 284 .

[2] Fred Pattee, op. cit., p. 190.

of industry, who played an important role in politics. Gifted with huge financial ability, the hero, Cowperwood, drives through struggle after struggle to the possession of a tremendous fortune. His powerful abilities corrupt the city government and injure independent citizens. Finally Cowperwood holds in his hands the life efforts of many men. Cowperwood's career began in the last years of the nineteenth century when America was emerging from a lusty infancy, an era of wild cat schemes and fortunes on paper; he typifies the restless, seeking spirit of the times. That Dreiser adhered closely to fact in presenting this picture of Cowperwood is verified by Taylor:

> Long interested in this peculiarly American type, Dreiser had got from an exhaustive study of Charles Yerkes, a traction magnate of Philadelphia and Chicago, the factual basis for his hero, Cowperwood, who is made to act habitually on the philosophy which Dreiser thought implicit in the economic struggle.[1]

Further, the environment of Dreiser's newspaper training led him to assemble facts. Pattee remarks that Dreiser wanting facts for the novels The Financier and The Titan hunted for weeks through the Chicago papers for material.[2] Always he had to face the concrete reality.

Dreiser's success in typifying the economic and political conditions in these novels is twofold. First, he has given a convincing treatment of the leader of "big business" during its buccaneer era. Second, he understands the complicated economic situation. He knows Cowperwood's organization through the economic and political life of society. Van Doren offers this comment on the novels:

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[1] Walter F. Taylor, op. cit., p. 371.

[2] Fred Pattee, op. cit., p. 189.

> Cowperwood presents few difficulties to Dreiser. He understood the march of desire to its goal....He simplified the account of Cowperwood's adventures after wealth and power...like a peasant--though a peasant of genius--wondering how great riches are actually obtained and guessing at the mystery.[1]

And another writer states, though, rather sarcastically, that when Cowperwood makes money he is convincing because that is one activity which Dreiser's philosophy permits him to see.[2] Our hero's rise to financial power is accomplished by forming political alliances to enable him to secure franchises whereby he can monopolize streetcar and gas industries in Chicago. Through the use of an able politician, McKenty, and many lesser men, he is able to dominate. McKenty is characterized as a man who is at once a gambler, rumored owner and backer of many saloons and contracting companies, in short, the patron saint of the political and social underworld of Chicago, and who is naturally to be reckoned with in matters related to the city and state legislative programs.[3] From him, financiers, businessmen, saloon keepers and the whole range of political life obtained counsel and solutions to problems that they are willing to pay for. In Cowperwood's plans to monopolize industries of the city, it is only natural for him to appeal to McKenty. The ensuing conversation between Cowperwood and McKenty is one example of the close connection between economic and political life:

> "Well, Mr. McKenty," said Cowperwood, choosing his words.... "I want a franchise from the Chicago city council, and I want

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[1] Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 252.

[2] Llewellyn Jones, "Contemporary Fiction," American Writers on American Literature, ed. John Macy (New York, 1931), p. 495.

[3] Theodore Dreiser, The Titan (New York, 1914), p. 92.

> you to help me get it if you will....It was not long after I started out to get franchises to do business in Lake View...before I found myself confronted by interests which control three old city gas companies. Because of their opposition I made them an offer to combine these three companies and the new ones into one, take out a new charter and give the city a uniform gas service. They would not do that....Now I know that none of us are in politics or finance for our health. If I could get such a franchise it would be worth one-fourth to one-half of what I personally would make out of it."
>
> McKenty smiled. "I see," he said. "Isn't that a rather large order, though Mr. Cowperwood, seeking a new franchise....That's an interesting scheme you have. Of course the old companies wouldn't like your asking for a rival franchise, but once you had it, they couldn't object very well, could they?"[1]

The result of this visit was not long in manifesting itself. An ordinance is introduced to the city council and passed so quickly that there is no time for public discussion. Standing outside the city council door on the evening the bill is passed, one of the owners of the old gas companies declares emphatically:

> This is a scoundrelly piece of business. If the mayor signs that he should be impeached. There is not a vote in there tonight that has not been purchased--not one. This is a fine element of brigandage to introduce into Chicago. Why people who have worked for years and years to build up a business are not safe.[2]

But Cowperwood had gained control of the gas companies of the city by paying its politicians. The former owners had been defeated.

Further evidence of the domination of politics by financiers is shown by Dreiser in the same work. To show the vast sums of money spent by financiers

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[1] Ibid., pp. 95-6. Morison and Commager relate that lighting, water and gas companies depended only on municipalities for their existence. Plain bribery was often practiced with municipal councils, which gave away for nothing franchises worth millions, while their city remained unpaved, ill-lighted and inadequately policed. The Growth of the American Republic (New York, 1930), p. 699.

[2] Ibid., p. 100. See also Frederic L. Paxson, The New Nation (New York, 1915), p. 167; Woodrow Wilson, History of the American People (New York, 1902), p. 124.

during political elections in order that they might have free reign in amassing their fortunes, and in taxing the public, Dreiser pictures Cowperwood's rivals seeking to curb his influence by defeating his party. A conversation held by Mr. Hands, a financier, and Gilgan, a politician, serves to disclose the bribery and graft rampart in business and politics:

> "I haven't asked you to come here just to be talking over politics in general...Mr. Gilgan. I want to put a particular problem before you. Do you happen to know McKenty or Mr. Cowperwood....Well, suppose a group of influential men here in Chicago were to get together and guarantee sufficient funds for a city-wide campaign; now if you had the complete support of the newspapers and the Republican organization in the bargain, could you organize the opposition here so that the Democratic party could be beaten this fall.... I want to fix things so that McKenty-Cowperwood crowd couldn't get an alderman or a city official to sell out....There will be plenty of money forthcoming if you can prove to me, or rather to the group of men...that the thing can be done."[1]

Gilgan realizes that McKenty and Cowperwood are very powerful men, and the thought of defeating them in Chicago is a large task. Still, the thought of a large amount of money to be distributed through him, and the chance of gaining the city leadership in politics from McKenty are very inspiring, and he answers:

> "You see, Mr. Hand, the way things are now, the Democrats have the offices and the small jobs to give out.... Then they have the privilege of collecting money from those in office....That's another great privilege. Then this man Cowperwood employs all of ten thousand men at present.... Then there's the money a man like Cowperwood and others can contribute at election time. Say what you will, Mr. Hand, but it's the two and five and ten dollar bills paid out at the last moment over the saloon bars and polling places that do the work. Give me enough money--and at this noble thought, Mr. Gilgan straightened up--and I can carry every ward in Chicago, bar none. If I have money enough, he repeated, emphasizing the words...."There are ward captains, leaders, block captains, workers. They all have to have money...to

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, The Titan, p. 290.

> work up sentiment. It's spent in saloons, buying coal for mother, and getting Johnnie a new suit here and there....Some men may have to be brought into wards to live--kept in a boardinghouse for a week or ten days.[1]

Dreiser states that it is common knowledge to everyone that political capital is collected from office seekers, and that ballot boxes are stuffed, and lodging houses colonized during this period.[2] "Big business" was running the country.

Other instances of the politico-economic relationship can be found in The Financier. In connection with this, Dreiser relates that in the year 1861, Philadelphia was under such a corrupt financial system that the treasurers of the city were allowed to hold money belonging to the city without the demand on the part of anybody that it be invested by them at interest for the city's benefit. The money could be lent out, deposited in banks, or used to further private interests of anyone, so long as the principal was returned and no one the wiser. All they were expected to do, apparently, was to restore the principal on that money which was with them when they entered office. This theory of finance was not publicly sanctioned, but it was known politically and in high finance. All of the politicians were profiting in one way and another through city privileges.[3] Cowperwood and Company was chosen by city politicians as a bank of deposit. The financier's company is to go to market and have the money brought to par. Cowperwood can throw such amounts as he wishes into the market, and consequently depress the market. Then he can buy; and later, up would go the price.

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[1] Ibid., p. 291.

[2] Ibid. See also James T. Adams, op. cit., p. 138; Carl R. Fish, op. cit., p. 213.

[3] Theodore Dreiser, The Financier (New York, 1912), p. 94.

Considerable money could be made out of the manufactured fluctuations. Dreiser has this to say of such transactions:

> Manipulative tricks have always been worked in connection with stocks of which one man or one set of men has had complete control. It was no different from what was subsequently done with Erie, Standard Oil, Copper, Sugar, Wheat....[1]

All this was done without the knowledge or consent of the people. The misapplication of public money by financiers and politicians was one of the great crimes of the age.

Yet, even among political associates and party members, there was a marked course of political and social trickery, chicanery, and financial dishonesty. Politics was a fickle thing. Dreiser points out that each man served his own interests and that party loyalty, though bought, could not be depended upon. Cowperwood's party is defeated by the Republicans; but through plotting and planning they are able to bribe the Republicans. Even Gilgan, a Republican leader, joins them. Witness another conversation held by Hands and Gilgan after Hands has inquired as to how soon a vote on the General Electric franchise, which had been introduced, could be expected. Gilgan declares himself much grieved to admit that considerable opposition seemed to have developed to the measure:

> "What's that?" said Hands, a little savagely. "Didn't we make a bargain in regards to this? You had all the money you asked for, didn't you....You're not going back on your bargain, are you?"
>
> "Bargain! bargain!" retorted Gilgan...."I agreed to elect twenty-six Republican aldermen, and that I did. I don't own 'em body and soul....I'm not responsible for any crooked work that's going on behind my back, am I...."

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[1] Ibid., p. 104. James T. Adams relates that Gould, who by his issues of illegal stock in the Erie, wrecked that road and made in that and other ways a fortune of $25,000,000 in not more than a decade. Op. cit., p. 138.

> "Everyone of them had your personal endorsement," insisted Hand;...."You don't mean to say that they're going back on their sacred agreement to fight Cowperwood tooth and nail? There can't be any misunderstanding on their parts as to what they were elected to do."[1]

The Republican politicians had given their services to the highest bidder, a Democrat, however; Hand's cause is lost.

To see further the extent of party fickleness, witness a conversation between Kerrigan, a Democrat, and a Republican leader. It had been suggested to Kerrigan that he give his support to the opposition. Kerrigan answers:

> "What do you want me to do anyhow? Lose my seat in council and be run out of the Democratic party?"
> "No one is asking you to lose your seat. What's to hinder you from electin' yourself and dropping the rest of the ticket?" He had almost said "knifing." "They can't run you out for cutting the ticket. They can't prove it. We'll bring police in here to make it look like a fair vote."[2]

Mr. Kerrigan suddenly sees a large opening here. He can receive from the Democrats twenty to twenty-five thousand to do their dirty work. And if it looks favorable for the Republicans it will be easy to complain that his workers had been suborned. If it looks certain for the Democrats to win, he can leave the Republicans and pocket the funds. In either case he would gain about thirty thousand dollars; and he would still be councilman. Such were the ways of crooked and fickle politicians during the era of commercialism.

Dreiser, believing intensely that all politicians were innately shrewd, crooked and selfish, goes to great lengths to cite examples. Wiliness is

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, The Titan, p. 338. Harry Carmen writes that open and wholesale bribery took place among politicians and financiers. Legislators pledged their faith to the highest bidder; and one senator accepted $75,000 from Vanderbilt, $100,000 from Gould and voted for the latter. Op. cit., p. 652.

[2] Ibid., p. 300. See also Frederic L. Paxson, op. cit., p. 166.

shown as the great trademark of both financiers and politicians; and this weapon they use in over-powering all rivals. Now Cowperwood is well aware of the derogatory attitude of Mayor Sluss toward granting him additional franchises for street railways; therefore he sees fit to look into the Mayor's private affairs. A Mrs. Brandon is assigned to have an affair with the eminent, upright, and married Mr. Sluss, weak man that he is; data are carefully obtained as to their meetings; and letters are secretly treasured. Finally the Mayor receives this call from the Financier:

> "Unless you come to my office before five o'clock this afternoon you will face by noon tomorrow a suit for breach of promise, and your letters to Mrs. Brandon will be given to the public. I wish to remind you that an election is coming on, and that Chicago favors a mayor who is privately moral as well as publicly so. Good morning."[1]

Mayor Sluss becomes mentally distressed. He thinks of his wife, his family and his political career. He feels that he can never again sign an ordinance for the Financier, for that would be dishonest, a scandal to the city. Yet, at the same time, he can not very well refuse Mr. Cowperwood, who has blackmailed him. Needless to say that after appearing at Cowperwood's office, he is won over to the Financier's cause. Dreiser offers this comment concerning the affair:

> It was an amazing situation in some respects, but those who know anything concerning the intricacies of politics, finance and corporate control, as they were practiced in those palmy days, would never marvel at the wells of subtlety, sinks of misery, and morasses of disaster which they represented.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 373.

[2] Ibid., p. 326. James Adams states that such men could plot their economic plans with imperial vision, but for the effect of their lives on society they cared nothing whatever. Op. cit., p. 213. However, Carl Fish is of the opinion that this did not mean that the American people were going to the dogs, nor that the majority of our politicians or our businessmen were immoral. It means that the times gave unusual opportunity to the evilminded, and little chance for the honest to assert themselves. Op. cit., p. 466.

Moreover, Dreiser saw this politico-economic relationship as destructive to American institutions. In prisons, for instance, he notes the favoritism displayed by politicians to the prison's wealthy inmates; he reveals the utter corruptness of its policies. Cowperwood has been imprisoned for grand larceny, and as a consequence is committed to Eastern District Penitentiary of Pennsylvania. The warden, Demas, is an Irish politician who gives special consideration to those favored by politicians. Dreiser remarks that his greatest weakness is that he is not quite mentally able to recognize that there are mental and social differences between prisoners, and that now and then one is apt to appear who, with or without political influences, is eminently worthy of special consideration.[1] What Demas can recognize are the differences pointed out to him by politicians. And he favors Cowperwood by allowing him many of the comforts of home that can reasonably be given under the circumstances.[2] All of the inmates, writes Dreiser, work here for the warden, and some allied politicians make profits out of prison industry. It is really not hard labor; the tasks are simple; all of the products are promptly sold, and the profits are retained by politicians.[3] Not only in the prisons but in the courts also, Dreiser divulges the system of political chicanery. To him, it is not in terms of guilt or innocence that a person is tried for a crime, but in terms of political advancement. In An American Tragedy, Dreiser relates the trial of Clyde Griffith, a story based upon the actual trial of Chester Gillette for the murder of a young girl in 1906.[4]

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, The Financier, p. 444.

[2] Ibid., p. 446.

[3] Ibid., p. 455.

[4] Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 256.

Dreiser states that Mason, the district attorney, decided to communicate with the governor of the state for the purpose of obtaining a special term of the Supreme Court for the district. Strictly to himself, however, he keeps the fact that in view of his own approaching nomination in the ensuing election, this should all prove opportune. He dares not let Clyde escape, especially since Clyde's trial would give him political and social fame the world over.[1] Therefore Clyde's trial is rushed before Mason's term of office expires. Mason makes these remarks before the beginning of the trial:

> "While I certainly don't think we ought to mix politics in with crime, there certainly is no reason why we shouldn't handle this in such a way as to make it count in our favor. You know what a case like this can mean from a political point of view.[2]

Corruption in politics and in finance, as Dreiser sees it, affect all parts of American civilization. As a consequence the masses are being deceived, crushed and oppressed. Their rights have been revoked. Witnessing the prevailing corruption, Dreiser comes to denounce society's practices; concerning his beliefs, he writes:

> I believed then, as I do now, that the chains wherewith a rapidly developing financial oligarchy or autocracy meant to bind a liberty-deluded mass, were then being forged. I felt then as I do now, that the people of that day should have been more alive to their interests, that they should have compelled at Washington or elsewhere, by peaceable political means if possible, by dire and threatening uprisings if necessary, a more careful concern for their interests, than any congressman, senator or governor or president, at that time or since, was giving them.[3]

In Dreiser's criticism of American political and economic civilization, he sees that there exists a close relationship between politics and finance.

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York, 1925), p. 166.

[2] Ibid., p. 93.

[3] Theodore Dreiser, A Book About Myself, p. 408.

Politicians are supported and rewarded by financiers; they in return pass legislation in the financier's favor. Dreiser sees the fickleness that exists between politicians, who are disloyal even to their own party associates if more money is involved in the issue. Moreover, he pictures the selfishness, subtlety, bribery and graft that exist in politics at large, in public finance, in prisons, and in the courts. To Dreiser, all politicians are corrupt, and all financiers prey upon the public. But, Fadiman says concerning him:

> It is certainly noteworthy that in the one thousand two hundred pages of the history of Frank Cowperwood there are few, if any, which attempt in realistic social terms an interpretation of his predatory career. There is no word of the tens of thousands who paid in blood and toil that the financier might amass his tasteless collections. The sources of his profits are never questioned, or, are taken for granted. Neither does Dreiser envision the life of Cowperwood and his kind, or the life that they engendered in America.[1]

Nevertheless, the majority of the critics agree with Van Doren that Dreiser's portrayal of the economic and political civilization in America is the most substantial that American business has yet to show in fiction.[2]

The novels Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerharht, The Genius, and An American Tragedy are not novels mainly concerned with the economic and political life of America, as are The Financier and The Titan; yet, Dreiser reveals through these novels how the life of a society wholly given over to industrialism and how the spirit of the late nineteenth--and early twentieth--centuries with their interest in material values, affect the lives of the poeple. Charles Walker makes this statement concerning Dreiser:

> Dreiser is a conscientious artist, who, according to the degree of his knowledge and power, sometimes aided, sometimes checked by his philosophy, succeeds ultimately

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[1] Clifton Fadiman, "Dreiser and the American Dream," The Nation, CXXXV (October, 1932), 365.

[2] Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 252. Also see Percy Boynton, "American Authors of Today," English Journal, XII (March, 1923), 192.

> in getting down a picture of human existence in a materialistic environment that is at once ugly, passionate and profound.[1]

Pattee has this opinion of the novelist:

> To Dreiser environment is the dominant molding force. He will show us only the disintegration of a character under the pressure of environment, and always in its material forms.[2]

The full import of Dreiser's portrayal of American life is that a world given over to mechanism is inevitably a tragic world because it denies full humanity to its human beings. Whipple makes this significant comment concerning Dreiser's portrayal of American life:

> American life as he renders it has two outstanding features: chaos and tragedy. It is a free for all of personal aggrandizement, a wild struggle to get what each can out of the general grab bag. The strongest, the ablest and most unscrupulous win the prizes--a futile victory because it brings no lasting satisfaction.[3]

Dreiser, with innate understanding of the strong American accent upon wealth, shows how the character of the individual is affected by his environment. For example, the novel Sister Carrie gives a clear picture of the influence of environment in shaping human life and actions. Sister Carrie, the heroine, is a poor girl whose state of poverty influences her to become the mistress of a young salesman. Finally she is duped into an illigitimate marriage with a saloon-keeper, Hurstwood, whom she abandons and wins success on the stage. But the direct cause of Carrie's actions is environment. Carrie, as the author describes her, is "a work seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation."[4] And Carrie feels the desire for

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[1] Charles R. Walker, "How Big is Dreiser?" The Bookman, LXIII (April, 1926), 149.

[2] Fred Pattee, op. cit., p. 188.

[3] T. K. Whipple, op. cit., p. 82.

[4] Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York, 1900), p. 24.

wealth and beauty. She realizes in a dim way how much the city holds--wealth, fashion, ease, every adornment for women; and she longs for dress and beauty with a whole heart.[1] Obtaining a job in a factory, she becomes ill under the strenuous working conditions; for the new socialism which demands pleasant working conditions had not then been established. The factory is described as follows:

> The place smelled of the oil of the machines and the new leather....Not the slightest provision had been made for the comfort of the employees, the idea being that something was gained by giving them as little and making the work as hard and unrenumerative as possible. The washrooms were disagreeable, crude, if not foul places; and the whole atmosphere was sordid.[2]

Working under such conditions at four dollars per week, and having to disburse with three dollars and fifty cents for board and room, Carrie feels that she should be better served by life; consequently her heart revolts. "As for Carrie," says Dreiser, "her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, money: something everybody else has and I must get."[3] And so Carrie chose the easy path to security.

Likewise, Witla in The Genius is influenced by the economic environment. He renounces his aspirations to become a great artist in order to become a prosperous businessman. The lure of wealth is too strong for him. Witla looking at the city of New York has these feelings:

> He felt intuitively the far reaches which separate the ordinary man from the scion of wealth. It curled him up like a frozen leaf, dulled his very soul, and gave him a clear sense of his position in the social scale....Daily he felt himself crumbling. What was he?

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[1] Ibid., p. 25.

[2] Ibid., pp. 43-4.

[3] Ibid., p. 47.

> What did the city care? It was much more interested in other things....The lower part of the island was filled with cold commercialism which frightened him,...the upper half, which concerned only...show, a voluptuous sybaritism--caused him envy.[1]

These feelings within Witla are due to the opening of the golden age of luxury in New York; the effect of the continued sight of such display distresses him. Money is being made in the West, the South and the North; and as soon as those who are making it have a sufficient amount to permit them to live in luxury for the rest of their lives they move East and give the city its air of spendthrift luxury.[2] Witla, as he strolls about the city, sees this and realizes that the drift in America is toward greater luxury and greater beauty. Dreiser describes him as being full of the necessity of living now. He feels an eager desire to tear wealth and fame from the bosom of the world. Life must give him his share.[3] Rapidly rising in the business world, Witla finally becomes advertising manager for a great publication corporation. Then his mood changes:

> Eight thousand dollars! ten next year, thought Eugene. Was he eventually going to become a great businessman instead of a great artist. He foresaw an apartment on Riverside Drive...a house in the country perhaps...an automobile....What artist's career could compare to this? Why should he worry about being an artist? Did they ever get anywhere? Would the approval of posterity let him ride in an automobile now? Posterity could go to the devil! He wanted to live now--not in the approval of posterity.[4]

Witla continues through life seeking ease to aspiration. The pressure of environment influences him so much that he can only look forward to material gains.

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, The Genius (New York, 1915), p. 148.

[2] Ibid., pp. 149-50.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 440.

Dreiser can write of such desires for material gains imbued within the American spirit because he too had harbored such longings. Yet, Stuart Sherman says that he simplifies American life almost beyond recognition, and that his field seems curiously outside of American society because of the lack of morals in his characters:

> Dreiser is not a good novelist because living in a great society, he does not express or represent its human characteristics; but confines himself to an exhibition of the habits and traits of animals....He has evaded the enterprise of representation of animal behavior....He imposes his own naturalistic philosophy upon his characters making them do what they ought not to do, and think what they ought not to think.[1]

Walter Bronson remarks that his boasted truth is rather in the description of setting and conditions than in the understanding and the portrayal of the human spirit:

> Dreiser is a powerful nature in whom the coarse and low bulk larger than the fine and high, although the latter qualities are not wholly absent.[2]

But Mencken, in contrast, states that Dreiser's characters are types of the national character, almost archetypes of the muddle, aspiring, tragic, fate-flogged mass. And the scene in which they are set is brilliantly national, too. The cities of those great days of feverish money-grabbing and crazy aspiration may well stand as the epitome of America; and in Jennie Gerhardt, he says that this is made clearer than in any American novel, almost as clear as the Paris of Balzac and Zola. Moreover, Mencken has this inclusive summing-up of Dreiser's portrayal of life:

> His aim is not merely to record, but to translate and understand; the thing he exposes is not the empty event and act, but the endless mystery out of which it springs;

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[1] Stuart Sherman, "The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser," The Nation, CI (December, 1915), 649.

[2] Walter Bronson, A Short History of American Literature (New York, 1919), p. 310.

> his pictures have a passionate compassion in them that is hard to separate from poetry.[1]

Like Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt is a victim of poverty and misfortune. Loving and tender in nature, she makes numerous sacrifices to aid her family and the man whom she loves. Like Carrie, she desires to escape from the physical miseries in the struggle for existence; and each becomes mistresses of men. Jennie's poverty strickened family of nine had an income of fifteen dollars per week. From this total income, all nine individuals had to be fed and clothed, the rent paid, coal purchased, and the regular monthly furniture bill paid. Speaking of these people, Dreiser says:

> How it was done those comfortable individuals who frequently discuss the social aspects of poverty might well trouble themselves. Rent, coal, and light alone consumed...twenty dollars a month, food another unfortunately necessary item...twenty-five more, clothes, installment dues, occasional items of medicine and the like were met out of the remaining eleven--how, the ardent imagination of the reader can guess.[2]

More misfortune comes to Jennie's family with the father's loss of his job after being injured at the mill. His contribution of five dollars a week ceases. Jennie is desperate. She becomes the mistress of a wealthy man, who loved her, but wealth and power would not permit him to marry her, or to continue his relationship with her. Because of this, Dreiser asks:

> Was not her life a patchwork of conditions made and affected by these things which she saw--wealth and force--which had found her unfit? This panoply of power had been paraded before her since childhood. What could she do now but stare vaguely after it as it marched triumphantly by?[3]

Jennie Gerhardt, good and noble and even heroic in her sacrificial spirit, is one whose way of life is determined and shaped by the strong force of her environment.

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[1] H. L. Mencken, "Theodore Dreiser," The Shock of Recognition, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1943), p. 1187.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt (New York, 1911), p. 112.

[3] Ibid.

Also, Clyde in An American Tragedy is a victim of the environment of the industrial decade. Depressed by the shabby struggles of his parents, poor impractical street preachers, Clyde tries to escape to a happier life. Dreiser makes the statement that "his family was always hard up, never very well clothed and deprived of many comforts and pleasures which seemed common enough to others." In another country, Clyde might have been satisfied with his place in life. But in America, he had an indefinite longing for a world of luxury. The enormous pressure of modern economic society insisted that he must have wealth if he is to be respected. Everybody tells him what to have; nobody tells him what to be. So the traditional ideas of democratic equality and of the worth of plain people has less effect on him than the pressure of material wealth. So far as Clyde could see, money is everything. Van Doren is of the opinion that if Clyde had thought otherwise in the United States, and had been satisfied with his place in life, it would have been lack of enterprise.[1] And "the whole of America," writes Dreiser, "had conditioned and directed Clyde's life."[2] Such desires of Clyde culminates in a plan to murder his factory working girlfriend in order that he may be free to associate with those of a higher station in life. Consequently he is a person driven by the forces about him: wealth, luxury and society.

In Sister Carrie, Dreiser offers an explanation of the direct causes of his character's actions:

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[1] Carl Van Doren, op. cit., p. 256.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy, p. 154.

> We live in an age in which the impact of materialized forces is well-nigh irresistible, the spiritual nature is overwhelmed by the shock. The tremendous and complicated development of our material civilization...remultiplied and disseminated by such agencies as the railroad, the telegraph...and in short the whole machinery of our social intercourse--these elements of existence combine to produce a kaleidoscopic glitter, a dazzling and confusing phantasmogoria of life that...stultifies....We are weighed upon by too many forces.[1]

Clyde is a natural product of a highly commercialized age. Moreover, Dreiser shows that even his desire to commit murder is caused by the environment in which he lives.

Environment also shapes the actions of Lester, who is in love with Jennie Gerhardt, and who deems it wise to discontinue his relations with her because his father has seen fit to allot him only ten thousand dollars per year if he continues their relationship. Otherwise, one-fourth of a share in his father's huge manufacturing company is his. Lester meditates over the problem and muses:

> Ten thousand a year! Good Lord, any smart clerk can earn that....He could not afford to lose his fortune....Did he want to accept the shabby ten thousand a year? A great world was calling him. The sound of its voice was in his ears.[2]

Lester harbors the idea that he might remain with Jennie and begin in business in a picayune, obscure way. Then he thinks of the keen business rivalry, of the stigma of being tossed out into the world without definite connections. Dreiser in his criticism of Lester and American civilization remarks:

> The trouble with Lester was that...he lacked the ruthless narrowminded insistence of his individual superiority which is a necessary element in almost every business success. To be a forceful figure in the business world means, as a rule,

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie, p. 132.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, Jennie Gerhardt, pp. 296-7.

> that you must be an individual of one idea, and that the God-given one that life has destined you for a tremendous future.... It means that one thing, a cake of soap, a new can opener...must seize on your imagination with tremendous force, burn as a raging flame, and make itself the be-all and end of your existence.... Happiness must be beyond or the fire will not burn as brightly as it might....Lester did not possess this indispensable quality of enthusiasm....He saw through the illusions that are so often labeled pleasure.[1]

Lester had been reared in luxury; he had been in charge of large affairs in the commercial world, and with Jennie he finds himself facing the iron forces of conventions. Dreiser writes that Lester's private desires and opinions are as nothing in the face of public conviction. The race spirit manifests itself as having a system in charge, and the organization of society begins to show itself. How could he deliberately deny its mandates? People believed that some particular form of social arrangement is necessary for those of wealth. Lester must comply.[2] It is possible that Lester can live on ten thousand dollars a year. It is also possible that he can do without the million dollars that he inherited, without society and its pleasures; but Dreiser tells us that the economic organization of American civilization leads him to deny his happiness with the woman whom he loves, to become a part of those who ever quested for more material gains. More and more Dreiser illustrates that a practical society is drilled throughout its youth in false modes of thought and feeling which are of no value to its individuals and which only lead in the end to the ultimate disintegration of character. "He is a reporter who sees all men disintegrating under the pressure of environment," write Boas and Burton.[3] His men and women are placed in the midst of

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[1] Ibid., p. 304.

[2] Ibid., p. 374.

[3] Ralph Boas, Katherine Burton, op. cit., p. 25.

a multitudinous world, and become mannikins played with by material forces which they can never control and to which they are usually unable to adjust themselves.[1] It is a grim world that Dreiser writes about, a world given over to cold commercialism.

Dreiser is not only interested in the struggle of the great financier in the economic arena; in the same spirit he is able to see the struggles of the poor, those at the bottom of the social scale; for his own experiences had brought him into contact with this side of life. The vast differences in class alignments in the United States have been discussed in the previous chapter. And Dreiser has told us that his sympathy is always with the poor and unfortunate. Halleck remarks that Dreiser presents in a most realistic way the struggles of the poor and unfortunate.[2] Stanley Williams refers to him as "a literary ogre with a supreme compassion for the lowly."[3] And Burton Rascoe avers further that Dreiser is the first American novelist to show men and women earning a living under the process of industrialism. Other writers, in the main, had written about people who lived upon income.[4] In his novels, Dreiser pictures the laboring class at work and the role allotted to it under a harsh system of industrialism. Meagre wages are paid, unemployment is rampant, and living conditions are squalid. Labor is cheap, and laborers can barely eke out a living under such conditions. At the same time the population of the country is rapidly increasing.

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[1] Percy Boynton, op. cit., p. 183.

[2] Reuben Halleck, The Romance of American Literature (New York, 1934), p. 313.

[3] Stanley Williams, American Literature (Philadelphia, 1931), p. 146.

[4] Burton Rascoe, Prometheans (New York, 1933), pp. 250-1.

America had been painted as a land of wealth and opportunity to the new immigrants; and more were entering the country to take the places of the more restless and greatly underpaid; for those who had been brought over by the same picture of American civilization had become irritated and had demanded more pay. Dreiser in Sister Carrie presents a scene at a street railway strike. There had been general dissatisfaction as to the hours of labor required for motormen and to the wages paid them. Motormen had received two dollars a day in times past; but "trippers," men employed during the busy and rush hours to take a car out one trip, had been introduced. Thus the regular motorman's salary had been cut to one-half of the amount that he had formerly received and his hours had been lengthened to about fourteen hours. "Trippers," however, received only twenty-five cents for a trip; and when the busy hours were over, they were laid off. Worst of all, no man knew when he was going to get a car. He had to go to the barns in the morning and wait around --sometimes in bad weather until he was needed. Two trips were an average reward for so much waiting, a little over three hours work for fifty cents. The system was extending; and the men complained that soon only a few of the seven thousand employees would have regular two dollar-a-day jobs at all. The companies refused to accept the terms to abolish the system.[1] There wasn't much that the men could do. The companies, having unassailable powers, had the strength with them. They called out new men to take the striking men's places, for men were desperately in need of work. To show the extent of want and poverty among the lower classes, Dreiser creates the following

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie (New York, 1900), pp. 448-9.

conversation between two newly hired conductors:

> "I don't blame these fellers for striking," said one. "They've got the right of it all right, but I had to get something to do."
>
> "Same here," said the other. "If I had any job in Newark, I wouldn't be over here taking chances like these."
>
> "It's hell these days, ain't it?" said the man. "A poor man ain't nowhere. You could starve, by God, right in the streets, and there ain't most no one would help you."
>
> "Right you are," said the other. "The job I had I lost 'cause they shut down. They run all summer and lay up a big stock, and then shut down!"[1]

These men were forced by want and deprivation to accept the strikers' jobs; and though such cries as "Come down pardner, don't fight the poor, leave that to the corporations," are hurled at them by the mob as they pass on the streetcars, the men had to work.

At this time the feeling was being broadcast in America that great political and economic changes were at hand, that the tyranny of financiers at the top was giving away to a richer and happier life for all. A national eight hour day was being advocated, together with public ownership of public franchises.[2] Still, here in America were great street railway corporations serving the large population, taking toll from the humble citizens, and giving in return poor service, shabby cars, no adequate tax on the immense sums earned, and paying meagre wages to their employees. The economic life

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[1] Ibid., pp. 455-6.

[2] Arthur M. Schlesinger, op. cit., pp. 378-9. The chief bone of contention between labor and capital concerned wages, the work day, and the right of the employer to organize. Labor's demands betokened not merely a desire of the common man to augment his creature comforts, but also an aspiration to share more richly in the graces and opportunities afforded by modern civilization. Employers looked on wages as one among a number of necessary items in their operating expenses to be regulated by market conditions rather than by humanitarianism. Two antagonistic philosophies were struggling for dominance. See also S. Morison and H. Commager, op. cit., p. 703; Carl R. Fish, op. cit., p. 455.

in America in its relation to the laboring class was in a sad state of affairs.

In The Genius, for example, Dreiser's criticism of American economics reveals this "state of affairs" vividly and forcefully. Witla is seeking employment and is finding it a very difficult task. Dreiser offers this comment concerning the search for employment:

> Imagine if you can the crowds of men, forty, fifty, one hundred strong that wait at the door of every dry goods employment office, every streetcar registration bureau, at every factory, shop or office. He learned that men rose as early as four o'clock in the morning to buy a newspaper, and ran quickly to the address mentioned....He learned that some other men, such as waiters, cooks, hotel employees and so on, frequently stayed up all night in order to buy a paper at two in the morning, winter and summer, rain or snow, heat or cold, and hurry to the promising addresses....And all this was going on all the time....It was like the grinding of a millstone upper and nether. These were the chaff.[1]

Dreiser, intensely interested in the underprivileged, constantly contrasts their state in life with the rich. He can not understand the vast gap that spans the two classes of society. The new age with its revolutionary class alignments continuously perplexes him. "I charged life then, as I do now, with loading the dice and playing favoritism, and with unbelievable cunning and cruelty," Dreiser often remarks.[2] Each view of the laborers' struggle to live under the domination of industrialism increases this view of life.

Yet, in Dreiser's criticism of the sad economic plight of men in the lower levels of society, he sees that there is even among them a desire similar to that of the financier to outshine the lesser man. Among the poor, men, too, wanted leadership. The economic pressure is ever prodding them.

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[1] Theodore Dreiser, The Genius, p. 307.

[2] Theodore Dreiser, Dawn, p. 392.

In the factories, mills and shops, he sees great seeking for the privileges and honors of direction in such petty things as the proper piling of lumber, the planing of boards, the making of boards, desks and chairs; and men are grimly jealous of their talents and abilities in this respect. All are striving to do the work of intelligence, not unintelligence. They might complain of their work, quarrel with each other and their bosses; but it is because they are not able or permitted to do the higher work, and carry out the orders of the higher mind. The work of superior intelligence is the thing which each in his blind way is trying to do.[1] For instance, Clyde, in the American Tragedy, is a poor boy, whose family can barely exist. Yet Dreiser says of him:

> True to the American attitude toward life, he felt himself above the type of labor which was purely manual. What! Run a machine, lay bricks, learn to be a carpenter, or a plasterer or a plumber, when boys no better than himself were clerks...and assistants in banks and real estate offices and such.[2]

Dreiser thinks that a rough way of life is ordered to the best advantage, even under the poor man's system. Every man is seeking higher and even higher returns from life. And it is all due to the economic pressure of the age, according to Dreiser's portrayal. Critics admit that Dreiser with much vividness and color presents a true picture of American civilization during the period of which he writes, although he does have definite limitations. Pattee sustains this statement:

> The novels are good reporting. Their object primarily is not to preach or condemn but to hold the mirror up to the facts of the day. A poorly ground mirror it may be, one held up to selected areas it may be; yet the intent of the holder has been an honest one....He is a newspaperman.[3]

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[1]Theodore Dreiser, The Genius, p. 326.

[2]Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy, p. 14.

[3]Fred Pattee, op. cit., p. 190.

A most ardent champion retorts that Dreiser is most truthful in his presentation of the late nineties with its extremes of poverty and wealth, its supermen and superfools.[1] Still another writes that Dreiser stresses the seamy side of life too much; but this does not detract from his good points and his close observation.[2] And Whipple states further concerning Dreiser's presentation of life:

> Dreiser has assembled superabundant material for a penetrating and radical criticism of American life. Yet as a thinker, as social critic, and as artist, he has been rendered all but impotent by the influence of his philosophy.[3]

Granting Dreiser's disproportion, however, it is generally agreed that the part of life which Dreiser does see and present, he does with all the vividness and color of Balzac and Zola, whom he strove to imitate.

Dreiser as a critic of American economic and political civilization reveals the relationship of political and economic life, with special emphasis on the era from 1870 until 1900. First, he shows that financiers and corporation directors donate large sums of money to corrupt politicians to be assured that certain legislative bills would be passed in their favor in order that they might monopolize industries. Second, he reveals that bribery, graft, corruption and subtlety are rife even in the same political circles. Politics is a fickle thing. Being selfish, politicians look only toward furthering their own interests. They neither act in the interest of each other, nor of the people. In fact, both financiers and politicians are securing more and more wealth from heavy taxation of the people, from deluding them, and from ignoring their rights. Politicians and "big business" are running the country.

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[1]
[2] R. L. Duffus, op. cit., p. 359.
Reuben Halleck, op. cit., p. 313.
[3] W. K. Whipple, op. cit., p. 90.

Moreover, the influence and the pressure of the economic environment is shaping and molding the lives of the members of American society. Because of the numerous individuals who are poverty stricken, because of the will to rise imbued within the American spirit, and because of the ever prodding desire for material gains, the lives of the people are affected greatly. Individual character begins to disintegrate under the pressure of environment. For instance, Dreiser shows the poor choosing an immoral way of life in order to gain security in a society that disowns them; he shows the wealthy forsaking happiness to follow the lure of more material possessions; and he shows an artist rejecting his talent in order to rise and to become prominent in the financial world. Dreiser pictures American civilization as believing that ultimate pleasure and happiness lie within material values. And he points out that a society primarily given over to materialism does not allow full humanity to its people.

Also, the novelist pictures the sad plight of the lower class of society under the force of the economic pressure. Owners of factories and industries, "big business" men, had no consideration whatsoever for the laborer whom they overworked and underpaid. If their workers become irritable and rebel against such treatment, new men are promptly hired in their places. Furthermore, with such a system prevailing, unemployment is prevalent. Some men are starving while America represents the extremes of wealth and poverty. Although Dreiser recognizes the fact that the common man had little chance for advancement under the harsh force of a system dominated by the titans of finance, he sees the lesser man, too, becoming gross and ill-natured in his lower economic environment. Men of the working class constantly war among themselves. Envy and selfishness are prevalent. Each man vies for a high job, for self-advancement, for the job of intelligence. The common idea is held in America

that to be a laborer is a national disgrace, to be satisfied with one's place in life, to live and enjoy a quiet life--all is to lack enterprise. One must join the struggle to gain more material possessions. Dreiser pictures the whole of America as being under the control of a ruthless force--industrialism. And all of America is affected.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DREISER'S CRITICISM OF AMERICAN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

Theodore Dreiser as a critic of the economic and political life of America has proved to be one of America's foremost literary and social historians, especially of the period from 1870 to 1900. That his presentation of the facts about American life has been truthful and honest has been confirmed by many critics. It is admitted, however, that Dreiser's view of life is disproportionate because of his tendency to view only one side of American life, and that the coarser, more seamy side; nevertheless, it is still the accepted opinion that even though he does not present the picture of American economic-political life in its entirety, his interpretation of the seamy side is honest.

Dreiser's pessimistic attitude toward life was influenced greatly by three forces that had direct bearing upon him as a man and as a writer. The first force was the conditions of his own personal life. Dreiser, the son of poor immigrant parents, was the twelfth of thirteen children. Early in his life he was influenced negatively by his father's stern Catholicism and moral intolerance, and positively by his family and associate's total lack of moral restraint. Thus he came to believe that all religions are absurdities, and all moral controls, futile.

Plunging as a reporter into the vice and slum areas of Chicago, he saw only the seamy, coarser side of life. This view had tremendous effect upon him. Life, he began to feel, is divided into the weaker and the stronger men. The weaker man continues groping and poor; his stronger brother prospers and

soars. The continuous sight of corrupt politicians, charlatan religious leaders and unscrupulous men of the financial world imbued within him the idea that all politicians and religionists are corrupt, that all men of finance rise to their means through crooked and Machiavellian practices.

Still another force, the spirit of the times, aided in the development of Dreiser's pessimistic view of life. He lived in a period when the effect of the Industrial Revolution and scientific thought had changed the whole temper of American life. With the progress of mechanized industry, factories and cities had grown enormously. Great financiers and men of wealth had appeared on the American scene; and huge class alignments had been made in the United States. The vast gap that separated the rich from the poor in America was, indeed, a spectacle to be marvelled at. On one side were crowds of poor immigrants living in tenements and slum areas; on the other side were the "big business" men living in luxury and lavish show. Dreiser's view of this spectacle of extreme suffering and lavish show caused him much concern.

Moreover, the economic and the political life of the age was closely related. "Big business" was running the United States government. Men of finance spent great sums of money to elect politicians who would support legislation in their favor. Then, a high tariff was maintained to protect "big business," a tariff that did nothing for the masses but tax them heavier; and more than that, senate investigations revealed that many politicians were reaping untold benefits from sums of money donated them by financiers. Dreiser felt, then, that the interest and rights of the people were being usurped. Life, he felt, was cruel, haphazard and selfish, and men, like mere animals, only preyed upon each other.

Together with the conditions of his own personal life, and the spirit of

the times in which he lived, still another force, the literature which Dreiser had read, influenced his pessimistic attitude toward life. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the force of science began its conquest of national thought. English scientists such as Huxley, Spencer, Mills and Darwin, and naturalistic writers as Hardy, Zola, Balzac, de Maupassant and Tolstoi were being read and discussed. Dreiser, being an avid reader, could hardly fail to be stimulated by the new scientific philosophy and naturalistic literature. Reading Spencer, Huxley and Hardy, he came to believe that man is a mechanism ruled by forces over which he has no control. Man is baffled and buffeted by fate. To some, life is lavish; to others it is negligent and cruel. Reading the works of these writers, Dreiser's experiences in and views of life were reinforced as to the utter futility of most things in this world. Then, Balzac and Zola gave him the inspiration to write of things as he saw them, to picture the real facts about American life. Life, as others had written about it, Dreiser writes, was beautiful and happy; but he could not see this. He saw only sordidness and ugliness; and these writers, the scientific and naturalistic thinkers of the day, assured him that he was right.

As a portrayer and critic of the economic and political life in America, Dreiser reveals through his novels the close link between politics and economics. The novels, The Financier and The Titan, form a single story of the rise of a great financier through the aid of paid politicians. Financiers or "big business" men claimed the right to rule the economic destinies of the people in any way they could emure to their personal advantage; moreover, they received through bribery and graft, every favor they wished in the way of special privileges from the government. Political and financial competition, as Dreiser

pictures it, is ruthless, combative and unscrupulous. Every possible source of graft on city contracts, selling of offices, and dispersing with favors and franchises is practiced. Corruption was so rife throughout the country as to disgust honest men.

Because of the strong American accent upon material power, the people of the United States were affected tremendously. Dreiser, in the novels Sister Carrie, Jennie Gerhardt, The Genius, and An American Tragedy sees the disintegration of character under the forceful pressure of the economic life of the times. The thirst for wealth and luxuries ever prods the individuals of society. Sister Carrie and Jennie Gerhardt, both poverty stricken girls, turn to an easy way of life to gain security. Witla, in The Genius, suppresses his artistic ability in order to become a prosperous business man; and Clyde, in An American Tragedy, struggles persistently to reach a higher social level, a struggle that eventually leads him to murder. The quest for material wealth is a beckoning goal to Americans. And Dreiser sees the utter vacuum that lies beyond such a goal, the complete disintegration of individual character under a system of untold materialism.

Possessed with a keen sense of compassion for the poor and lowly, Dreiser is able to picture clearly the laborer's position in the economic world. Working long and hard for a mere pittance, the laborer is not obtaining his due share of the immense wealth which his dexterity and brawn have helped to create. Because of the steadily increasing population, unemployment is prevalent. Men are fired and hired according to the whims of corporation owners, who are opposed to labor welfare.

Still, the poor man, like his richer brother, struggles constantly to attain a higher station in life. Dissatisfaction, greed and ruthlessness enter in varying degrees into the actions of both classes. In America, Dreiser

points out, it is lack of enterprise to be content with one's place in life; one must constantly strive toward the possession of wealth, of luxuries and pleasures. It is a bleak world that Dreiser presents in his portrayal of the politico-economic life in America. It is a world with its hopes grounded in material values, a world that does not allow full humanity to the members of society.

From this study of Theodore Dreiser, his significance as a critic of American politico-economic life has proved to be threefold. First, Dreiser views the existing conditions in America objectively. He does not obviously and mawkishly preach, propagandize, nor condemn the practices that are rampant in American society. Neither is there evidence of purpose on the part of the author other than that of truthfully recording the facts. As Blair, Hornberger, and Stewart say, "There is no satire or cynicism or smartness in Dreiser...no manipulation of plot or trick of style. He recorded life as he saw it--with naturalness, candor, and compassion."[1] Indeed, he is, above all, a candid photographer of fact. Undoubtedly Dreiser will be rated as a prominent and reliable literary historian of the social scene of a stirring era.

Second, although Dreiser is an honest portrayer of fact, he is biased in his presentation of the politico-economic situation in America. Many critics admit that Dreiser's portrayal of American economic and political life is realistic and is consistent to fact. Yet, they also insist that Dreiser's view of existing conditions is curiously one-sided. His philosophy of naturalism permits him to see only the brutal and evil forces that exist in society, the seamy side of life. Therefore, he presents only the darker pictures of American life. He does not see the brighter ones. In this fact chiefly lies Dreiser's limitation as a critic of American political-economic life.

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[1] Walter Blair, Theodore Hornberger, and Randall Stewart (eds.), The Literature of the United States (Chicago, [1947]), II, 670.

And last, Dreiser's criticism of the economic and political life in America is significant because it serves as a stimulus to awaken the American public from its lethargy and chauvinism. Dreiser's description, documented and detailed, of the corruptness of an era has the power to stimulate or irritate those Americans who complacently or romantically view our politico-economic life to defend their position or to investigate conditions as they really exist. Are our leaders, our politicians and our government acting in the best interests of the people today? Is life today in America hampered by the lure of material gains? These questions and many more will come to the mind of the reader as he lives with Dreiser through his portrayal of the political and economic life in America during our age of industrialism. Dreiser motivates and tones up our thinking. For though it may prove difficult for a thinker of the widest views to appreciate his pessimistic attitude toward life, there can be no doubt that Dreiser as a portrayer, a critic, and a product of American society, although biased in his point of view, is important, illuminating, and intensely stimulating.

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